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Testimony in front of the Appropriations Committee – Higher Education

2/10/16 – Roger Senserrich, Connecticut Association for Human Services

Good morning Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Willis and members of the Appropriations Higher Education Subcommittee. My name is Roger Senserrich, and I am the Policy Director at the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a statewide nonprofit agency that works to reduce poverty and promote economic success through both policy and program work.

I am here today to discuss some important issues relating to the Governor's midterm budget adjustment proposals, and some changes that we believe could greatly reduce access to higher education for low-income students in the state.

The starting point for the Governor's proposal is a 5.75% spending reduction to funding for higher education across the board. The cut is by itself worrisome, but the revision's lack of detail adds to the problem. Instead of the traditional budget breakdown of proposed reductions with specific explanations of what line items are facing cuts, this proposal just offers an agency-wide spending level, and gives the authority to each agency head to decide where to cut. The result is a budget that imposes harsh spending cuts but is lacking in transparency, with no information on what programs will be eliminated.

This is not acceptable. Transparency is an essential for accountability. The Governor's budget proposal shifts the responsibility and decision making for crucial spending decisions from an open, public process at the General Assembly towards one with no public participation, no open hearings and limited accountability. We understand that the budget situation is challenging, and that Connecticut has to take some tough decisions. The only way to make those decisions and introduce real, needed changes to the state budget is through an open, accountable and transparent budget process, not by delegating authority to the executive branch.

These broad cuts mean that funding for crucial programs for low-income students is at risk, but without a clear indication of what might be cut. For instance, the Governor's proposal consolidates all the funding from the Transform CSCU initiative to "agency operating funds", meaning that we really do not know if funding for crucial education programs will be cut.

Transform CSCU 2020 is a broad initiative originally proposed by Governor Malloy to modernize Connecticut's higher education system. It included funding for revamped academic advising in

colleges, career pathways, better course alignment, better first-year experience for new students, and collaborations with the business community, among many other relevant programs. Most importantly for low-skilled students, Transform CSU included funding for developmental education programs, and more specifically, for transitional programs in partnership with adult education providers.

In 2012, Connecticut passed a sweeping reform of its developmental education system, Public Act 12-40. After three years of preparation, community colleges started fully implementing the reform in 2015. Under this new model, students who apply for community college and require developmental education are limited to one semester of remediation before having to enroll in credit-bearing classes. Those students that test at eight-grade or below in English or Math and would need more than one semester are placed in transitional programs, delivered in partnership with adult education providers in the region.

Transitional programs are not regular developmental classes – students can not use financial aid. The courses are offered for free, using Transform CSU funding to cover part of the cost while leveraging existing resources to provide the service. Transitional students need this support: they are overwhelmingly low-income and minority, often second language learners, sometimes with learning disabilities. They often face challenging personal situations, juggling a job, family and the struggles of poverty while participating in these programs. These students are making the effort to apply for college and seek an education in hopes for a better job and a better life, sometimes against overwhelming odds.

Although it is still too early to have complete data on the success of these transitional programs and implementation is still somewhat uneven, our research for a report released last fall indicates that the transitional model holds considerable promise¹ (I have attached copies of the report to my testimony.) The Governor's proposed adjustment, however, hides the funding for transitional programs under operating funds, meaning we cannot know if services might be reduced or eliminated. The Board of Regents would be able to eliminate these funding without oversight, leaving transitional programs without dedicated state funding, potentially leaving many students without a clear access path to higher education.

We want to preserve open access to community college, and we want to be sure that funding for transitional programs continues. If we want all students to succeed, the General Assembly must assert its authority over the budget process, and continue existing funding for transitional programs, including a strong evaluation component to adopt best practices across the state. Connecticut needs to lower barriers to higher education. More and more existing and future job openings will require qualified workers with post-secondary education, and the General Assembly must play a leading role ensuring that funding is allocated to the right programs in an accountable and transparent manner.

Thank you for your consideration.

¹ http://cahs.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CAHS2015_DevEdReform-final1.pdf